

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF MICHIGAN
NORTHERN DIVISION

JASON EDWARD BARNES
and BRANDON BOSCARINO,

Plaintiff,

Case No. 2:13-cv-270

v.

Honorable R. Allan Edgar

MICHIGAN DEPARTMENT
OF CORRECTIONS, et al.,

Defendants.

OPINION

This is a civil rights action brought by a state prisoners pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983. The Court has granted Plaintiffs leave to proceed *in forma pauperis*, and Plaintiffs have complied with the initial partial filing fee requirements. Under the Prison Litigation Reform Act, PUB. L. NO. 104-134, 110 STAT. 1321 (1996), the Court is required to dismiss any prisoner action brought under federal law if the complaint is frivolous, malicious, fails to state a claim upon which relief can be granted, or seeks monetary relief from a defendant immune from such relief. 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2), 1915A; 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c). The Court must read Plaintiffs' *pro se* complaint indulgently, *see Haines v. Kerner*, 404 U.S. 519, 520 (1972), and accept Plaintiffs' allegations as true, unless they are clearly irrational or wholly incredible. *Denton v. Hernandez*, 504 U.S. 25, 33 (1992). Applying these standards, Plaintiffs' action will be dismissed for failure to state a claim.

Factual Allegations

Plaintiffs Jason Edward Barnes and Brandon Boscarino, state prisoners who were confined at the Newberry Correctional Facility (NCF) during the pertinent time period, filed this civil rights action pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 against Defendants Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), Michigan Parole Board, Michigan Department of Mental Health, MDOC Director Daniel Heyns, and Sarah K. Rathburn.

In their complaint, Plaintiffs allege that because of the nature of their crimes, Defendant Rathburn wrote psychiatric evaluations regarding them which caused them to be denied Parole. Plaintiffs state that they are sex offenders, and that as such, they are treated more harshly than other prisoners with regard to parole considerations.

Plaintiffs claim that Defendants conduct violates their rights under the Eighth and Fourteenth Amendments. Plaintiffs seek damages and immediate release from prison.

Discussion

I. Failure to state a claim

A complaint may be dismissed for failure to state a claim if it fails ““to give the defendant fair notice of what the . . . claim is and the grounds upon which it rests.”” *Bell Atl. Corp. v. Twombly*, 550 U.S. 544, 555 (2007) (quoting *Conley v. Gibson*, 355 U.S. 41, 47 (1957)). While a complaint need not contain detailed factual allegations, a plaintiff’s allegations must include more than labels and conclusions. *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 555; *Ashcroft v. Iqbal*, 556 U.S. 662, 678 (2009) (“Threadbare recitals of the elements of a cause of action, supported by mere conclusory statements, do not suffice.”). The court must determine whether the complaint contains “enough facts to state a claim to relief that is plausible on its face.” *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 570. “A claim has facial

plausibility when the plaintiff pleads factual content that allows the court to draw the reasonable inference that the defendant is liable for the misconduct alleged.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679. Although the plausibility standard is not equivalent to a “‘probability requirement,’ . . . it asks for more than a sheer possibility that a defendant has acted unlawfully.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 678 (quoting *Twombly*, 550 U.S. at 556). “[W]here the well-pleaded facts do not permit the court to infer more than the mere possibility of misconduct, the complaint has alleged – but it has not ‘show[n]’ – that the pleader is entitled to relief.” *Iqbal*, 556 U.S. at 679 (quoting FED. R. CIV. P. 8(a)(2)); *see also Hill v. Lappin*, 630 F.3d 468, 470-71 (6th Cir. 2010) (holding that the *Twombly/Iqbal* plausibility standard applies to dismissals of prisoner cases on initial review under 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915A(b)(1) and 1915(e)(2)(B)(i)).

To state a claim under 42 U.S.C. § 1983, a plaintiff must allege the violation of a right secured by the federal Constitution or laws and must show that the deprivation was committed by a person acting under color of state law. *West v. Atkins*, 487 U.S. 42, 48 (1988); *Dominguez v. Corr. Med. Servs.*, 555 F.3d 543, 549 (6th Cir. 2009). Because § 1983 is a method for vindicating federal rights, not a source of substantive rights itself, the first step in an action under § 1983 is to identify the specific constitutional right allegedly infringed. *Albright v. Oliver*, 510 U.S. 266, 271 (1994).

Initially, the Court notes that Plaintiffs have named the Michigan Department of Corrections (MDOC), the Michigan Parole Board, and the Michigan Department of Mental Health as defendants in this case. Regardless of the form of relief requested, the states and their departments are immune under the Eleventh Amendment from suit in the federal courts, unless the state has waived immunity or Congress has expressly abrogated Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute. *See Pennhurst State Sch. & Hosp. v. Halderman*, 465 U.S. 89, 98-101 (1984); *Alabama v.*

Pugh, 438 U.S. 781, 782 (1978); *O'Hara v. Wigginton*, 24 F.3d 823, 826 (6th Cir. 1993). Congress has not expressly abrogated Eleventh Amendment immunity by statute, *Quern v. Jordan*, 440 U.S. 332, 341 (1979), and the State of Michigan has not consented to civil rights suits in federal court. *Abick v. Michigan*, 803 F.2d 874, 877 (6th Cir. 1986). Therefore, Defendants Michigan Department of Corrections, Michigan Parole Board, and Michigan Department of Mental Health are immune from injunctive and monetary relief. See *Horton v. Martin*, 137 F. App'x 773, 775 (6th Cir. 2005) (Michigan Parole Board entitled to Eleventh Amendment immunity); *Lee v. Mich. Parole Bd.*, 104 F. App'x 490, 492 (6th Cir. 2004) (same); *Fleming v. Martin*, 24 F. App'x 258, 259 (6th Cir. 2001) (same).

To establish a procedural due process violation, a plaintiff must prove that (1) he was deprived of a protected liberty or property interest, and (2) such deprivation occurred without the requisite due process of law. *Club Italia Soccer & Sports Org., Inc. v. Charter Twp. of Shelby*, 470 F.3d 286, 296 (6th Cir. 2006); see also *Swihart v. Wilkinson*, 209 F. App'x 456, 458 (6th Cir. 2006). Plaintiff fails to raise a claim of constitutional magnitude because he has no liberty interest in being released on parole. There is no constitutional or inherent right to be conditionally released before the expiration of a prison sentence. *Greenholtz v. Inmates of Neb. Penal & Corr. Complex*, 442 U.S. 1, 7 (1979). Although a state may establish a parole system, it has no duty to do so; thus, the presence of a parole system by itself does not give rise to a constitutionally protected liberty interest in parole release. *Id.* at 7, 11; *Bd. of Pardons v. Allen*, 482 U.S. 369, 373 (1987). Rather, a liberty interest is present only if state law entitles an inmate to release on parole. *Inmates of Orient Corr. Inst. v. Ohio State Adult Parole Auth.*, 929 F.2d 233, 235 (6th Cir. 1991).

In *Sweeton v. Brown*, 27 F.3d 1162, 1164-165 (6th Cir. 1994) (en banc), the Sixth Circuit, noting “the broad powers of the Michigan authorities to deny parole,” held that the Michigan system does not create a liberty interest in parole. In a recent published decision, the Sixth Circuit reiterated the continuing validity of *Sweeton*. See *Crump v. Lafler*, 657 F.3d 393, 404 (6th Cir. 2011). In *Crump*, the court held that the adoption of specific parole guidelines since *Sweeton* does not lead to the conclusion that parole release is mandated upon reaching a high probability of parole. See *id.*; see also *Carnes v. Engler*, 76 F. App’x 79, 80 (6th Cir. 2003). In addition, the Sixth Circuit has rejected the argument that the Due Process Clause is implicated when changes to parole procedures and practices have resulted in incarcerations that exceed the subjective expectation of the sentencing judge. See *Foster v. Booker*, 595 F.3d 353, 369 (6th Cir. 2010). Finally, the Michigan Supreme Court has recognized that there exists no liberty interest in parole under the Michigan system. *Glover v. Mich. Parole Bd.*, 596 N.W.2d 598, 603-04 (Mich. 1999).

Until Plaintiffs have served their maximum sentences, they have no reasonable expectation of liberty. The discretionary parole system in Michigan holds out “no more than a mere hope that the benefit will be obtained.” *Greenholtz*, 442 U.S. at 11. The Michigan Parole Board’s failure or refusal to consider Plaintiffs for parole, therefore, implicates no federal right. In the absence of a liberty interest, Plaintiffs fail to state a claim for a violation of their procedural due process rights.

Plaintiffs also assert that Defendants’ conduct violated their rights under the Eighth Amendment. The Eighth Amendment to the United States Constitution, applicable to the states through the Due Process Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, protects against cruel and unusual punishments. See U.S. CONST., amend. VIII; *Harmelin v. Michigan*, 501 U.S. 957, 962 (1991). The

Eighth Amendment, however, does not require strict proportionality between a crime and its punishment. *Harmelin*, 501 U.S. at 965; *United States v. Marks*, 209 F.3d 577, 583 (6th Cir. 2000). “Consequently, only an extreme disparity between crime and sentence offends the Eighth Amendment.” *Marks*, 209 F.3d at 583. A sentence that falls within the maximum penalty authorized by statute “generally does not constitute ‘cruel and unusual punishment.’” *Austin v. Jackson*, 213 F.3d 298, 302 (6th Cir.2000) (quoting *United States v. Organek*, 65 F.3d 60, 62 (6th Cir. 1995)).

In the instant case, the Court notes at the outset that the Eighth Amendment claim is factually baseless. The parole board did not issue a sentence. Rather, the Parole Board merely declined to extend parole to Plaintiffs. *See Preston v. Hughes*, No. 97-6507, 1999 WL 107970, *2 (6th Cir. Feb. 10, 1999). Moreover, assuming Defendants’ decision may be considered the imposition of punishment, Plaintiffs fail to allege that their sentences fall outside the maximum allowed by statute. Therefore, Plaintiffs’ sentences do not run afoul of the Eighth Amendment’s ban of cruel and unusual punishment. *Austin*, 213 F.3d at 302.

Finally, Plaintiffs claim that Defendants discriminated against them on the basis that they are convicted sex offenders. The Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment provides that a state may not “deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws.” U.S. CONST., amend XIV; *City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Ctr.*, 473 U.S. 432, 439 (1985). The Equal Protection Clause does not forbid all classifications, but simply prevents governmental decision makers from treating differently persons who are similarly situated in all relevant respects. *Cleburne*, 473 U.S. at 439; *F.S. Royster Guano Co. v. Virginia*, 253 U.S. 412, 415

(1920); *Richland Bookmart, Inc. v. Nichols*, 278 F.3d 570, 574 (6th Cir. 2002) (the Clause “protects against arbitrary classifications, and requires that similarly situated persons be treated equally.”).

“Strict scrutiny of an alleged equal protection violation is only employed if the classification at issue discriminates on the basis of a suspect criterion or impinges upon a fundamental right.” *Hadix v. Johnson*, 230 F.3d 840, 843 (6th Cir. 2000). The Michigan legislation does not implicate a fundamental right because there is no constitutional right to release on parole. *Greenholtz v. Inmates of Neb. Penal and Corr. Complex*, 442 U.S. 1, 7 (1979); *Sweeton v. Brown*, 27 F.3d 1162, 1164-65 (6th Cir. 1994). In addition, prisoners are not a suspect class. *Hadix*, 230 F.3d at 843; *Wilson v. Yaklich*, 148 F.3d 596, 604 (6th Cir. 1998); *Hampton v. Hobbs*, 106 F.3d 1281, 1286 (6th Cir. 1997); *see also Zehner v. Trigg*, 133 F.3d 459, 463 (7th Cir. 1997) (dismissing as “completely unsupported” the idea that prisoners are a suspect class). Specifically, convicted sex offenders are not a suspect class and, therefore, any laws or classifications that they may be subject to are reviewed under the rationale basis test. *Cutshall v. Sundquist*, 193 F.3d 466, 482 (6th Cir. 1999). Thus, in order to establish an equal protection violation, Plaintiffs must show that the Michigan scheme differentiates between similarly situated persons and is not rationally related to any conceivable legitimate governmental purpose. *Vill. of Willowbrook v. Olech*, 528 U.S. 562, 564 (2000); *Hadix*, 230 F.3d at 843.

Plaintiffs’ equal protection claim fails because the classification survives rational basis review.

[U]nder rational basis review, . . . the classification need not be the most narrowly tailored means available to achieve the desired end. . . . The statute need not be the best possible reaction to the perception, nor does the perception itself need to be heavily buttressed by evidentiary support. It is enough that the perceived

problem is not obviously implausible and the solution is rationally suited to address that problem.

Zehner, 133 F.3d at 463 (rejecting prisoners' argument that 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(e) violates equal protection by limiting relief which may be sought by prisoners). In addition, the Court's determination in this case must be made in light of the constant admonition by the Supreme Court that the problems of prison administration are peculiarly for resolution by prison authorities and their resolution should be accorded deference by the courts. *See Washington v. Harper*, 494 U.S. 210, 224 (1990); *Turner v. Safley*, 482 U.S. 78, 84-96 (1987); *O'Lone v. Estate of Shabazz*, 482 U.S. 342, 349 (1987); *Bell v. Wolfish*, 441 U.S. 520, 547 (1979); *Jones v. N.C. Prisoners' Labor Union*, 433 U.S. 119, 125-126 (1977).

“‘The purpose of parole is to keep a prisoner in legal custody while permitting him to live beyond the prison enclosure so that he may have an opportunity to show that he can refrain from committing crime.’” *People v. Gregorczyk*, 443 N.W.2d 816, 821 (Mich. Ct. App. 1989) (citation omitted). Protection of public safety is a stated purpose of Michigan's parole statutes. *Hopkins v. Mich. Parole Bd.*, 604 N.W.2d 686, 689 (Mich. Ct. App. 1999) (“First and foremost, [the Parole Board] may not grant a prisoner liberty on parole until it ‘has reasonable assurance, after consideration of all of the facts and circumstances, including the prisoner's mental and social attitude, that the prisoner will not become a menace to society or to the public safety’”) (quoting MICH. COMP. LAWS § 791.233(1)(a)). Preventing the early release of potentially violent inmates is a legitimate governmental interest. *See Wottlin v. Fleming*, 136 F.3d 1032, 1037 (5th Cir. 1998) (affirming rejection of equal protection challenge raised by § 2241 petitioner; Bureau of Prisons rule which provided that inmates having prior convictions for homicide, forcible rape, robbery, or

aggravated assault were not eligible for early release was “rationally related to the legitimate governmental interest of preventing the early release of potentially violent inmates”).

In addition, Michigan’s statutory scheme furthers the rights of victims, *see* MICH. COMP. LAWS § 780.771, which is also a legitimate and rational state purpose. *Johnson v. Rodriguez*, 110 F.3d 299, 307 n.11 (5th Cir. 1997) (reversing district court finding that Texas parole scheme violated prisoners’ equal protection rights). Finally, Michigan’s parole statutes also include economic considerations, which are a legitimate government interest. *See Franciosi v. Mich. Parole Bd.*, 586 N.W.2d 542, 546 (Mich. Ct. App. 1998) (holding that MICH. COMP. LAWS §791.236(6), which prohibited attorneys from representing prisoners at parole release hearings, was rationally related to legitimate economic considerations), *aff’d*, 604 N.W.2d 675 (Mich. 2000).

There are numerous factors and considerations used by the Michigan Parole Board in determining whether parole is appropriate. Consideration of the nature of particular offense of an inmate is clearly rational and not arbitrary. Moreover, the Supreme Court recently has recognized that rational basis scrutiny is not properly applied to employment decisions and other discretionary decisionmaking:

There are some forms of state action, however, which by their nature involve discretionary decisionmaking based on a vast array of subjective, individualized assessments. In such cases the rule that people should be “treated alike, under like circumstances and conditions” is not violated when one person is treated differently from others, because treating like individuals differently is an accepted consequence of the discretion granted. In such situations, allowing a challenge based on the arbitrary singling out of a particular person would undermine the very discretion that such state officials are entrusted to exercise.

Engquist v. Oregon Dep't of Agr., 128 S. Ct. 2146, 2154 (2008). Parole considerations are the type of discretionary decisions discussed in *Engquist* that typically are “subjective and individualized, resting on a wide array of factors that are difficult to articulate and quantify.” *Id.* Discretion to grant parole is squarely lodged with the Parole Board. *See Sweeton v. Brown*, 27 F.3d at 1164-165 (noting the broad authority of the Michigan Parole Board to make discretionary decisions). Applying *Engquist*, even an arbitrary parole decision would not violate Plaintiffs’ equal protection rights.

Conclusion

Having conducted the review required by the Prison Litigation Reform Act, the Court determines that Plaintiffs’ action will be dismissed for failure to state a claim pursuant to 28 U.S.C. §§ 1915(e)(2) and 1915A(b), and 42 U.S.C. § 1997e(c).

The Court must next decide whether an appeal of this action would be in good faith within the meaning of 28 U.S.C. § 1915(a)(3). *See McGore v. Wrigglesworth*, 114 F.3d 601, 611 (6th Cir. 1997). For the same reasons that the Court dismisses the action, the Court discerns no good-faith basis for an appeal. Should Plaintiffs appeal this decision, the Court will assess the \$455.00 appellate filing fee pursuant to § 1915(b)(1), *see McGore*, 114 F.3d at 610-11, unless Plaintiffs are barred from proceeding *in forma pauperis*, e.g., by the “three-strikes” rule of § 1915(g). If they are barred, they will be required to pay the \$455.00 appellate filing fee in one lump sum.

This is a dismissal as described by 28 U.S.C. § 1915(g).

A Judgment consistent with this Opinion will be entered.

Dated: 11/18/2013

/s/ R. Allan Edgar
R. Allan Edgar
United States District Judge